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President Won't Attend Funeral

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President Reagan overrode the recommendation of his national security affairs adviser yesterday and decided not to attend the funeral of Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko because "there's an awful lot on my plate right now that would have to be set aside [and] I didn't see that anything could be achieved."

Sources said that national security affairs adviser Robert C. McFarlane and other White House officials, reportedly including deputy chief of staff Michael K. Deaver, thought that Reagan could show "openness" to the new Soviet leadership by attending the funeral.

But they said Reagan thought that it would be "a grandstand play" that would not make a lasting improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations. One official said Reagan also was concerned

that he would show "overeagerness" by traveling the long distance to Moscow for a brief meeting with new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Reagan will be one of the few world leaders not to attend the funeral. Governments of most West European countries announced yesterday that they would be represented in Moscow by the head of state or the prime minister. French Prime Minister Francois Mitterrand, who did not attend the funerals of Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev and Yuri Andropov, announced he will attend.

However, in Reagan's statements yesterday he emphasized his desire for good relations with the new Soviet leadership. Late in the day he visited the Soviet Embassy in Washington to sign a book of condolences. He also sent a condolence message to Soviet head of state Vasily Kuznetsov, repeating a

commitment "to reduce and eliminate nuclear weapons" in the U.S.-Soviet arms control talks in Geneva.

Reagan was somewhat less affirmative about the prospects for U.S.-Soviet relations at a luncheon meeting with out-of-town journalists from 28 states.

"You have to wait for a new man now to get in place and establish his regime, and then I'll be more than ready [to meet], because I think there's a great mutual suspicion between the two countries," Reagan said at the White House luncheon. "I think ours is more justified than theirs."

Reagan told his audience that he had wrestled with the question of going to Moscow for the funeral since being awakened by a call from McFarlane at 4 a.m. and told of Chernenko's death. Among the items he said are "on my plate" and preventing attendance is his meeting today with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and his scheduled overnight trip to Canada this Sunday to visit the new Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. Mulroney will host Reagan after returning from the Chernenko funeral.

"I didn't see where I could do it," Reagan said. "And the vice president is already in Europe, so that it would seem very logical for him to do that [attend Chernenko's funeral.]"

Reagan chose Vice President Bush to head a U.S. delegation that includes Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Arthur A. Hartman, the U.S. ambassador to Moscow. Bush headed similar delegations for the Brezhnev funeral in 1982 and Andropov funeral in 1984.

Shultz left Washington for Moscow last night accompanied by Assistant Secretary Richard R. Burt and Jack Matlock, senior Soviet expert on the national security council staff.

Addressing the group of regional journalists to which Reagan spoke, Shultz said the president is not attending the funeral because such action is "not conducive" to a full exchange of views.

"It has symbolic significance and perhaps a little content, but it simply isn't a setting in which you can have a good, thorough and searching examination of problems," Shultz said.

An administration official said Shultz initially was receptive to the proposal that Reagan go to Moscow but quickly agreed with the president's reasoning and was not surprised by his decision.

For the secretary of state and Deaver, the president's decision was a replay. Shultz strongly recommended in November 1982 that

Reagan attend the Brezhnev funeral, an action that was opposed by Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger. The president decided not to attend.

Officials familiar with the discussion at yesterday's meeting said Reagan was skeptical from the outset about the value of meeting Gorbachev at Chernenko's funeral.

"It was quickly obvious that the president had decided not to go, and we all accepted the decision," said one official.

Reagan is the only U.S. chief executive since Herbert Hoover who has not met with the leader of the Soviet Union during his presidency. He did not meet with any member of the Soviet leadership during his first term until his White House meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in September.

Reagan showed some sensitivity to this issue at his luncheon meeting, saying in response to a question that "in 48 years of eight presidencies prior to mine, there were only three leaders . . . of the Soviet Union."